LOUISVILLE TIMES
Louisville, Kentucky
July 3, 1963

Can Smoking Doubts Be Resolved?

CIGARETTE SMOKING has never been found guilty in a final, competent court of being a health hazard. On the other hand, it hasn't been acquitted, either. The verdict is not in.

Meanwhile, a great deal of evidence that presumably will be weighed before a verdict is returned has been piling up. It is not conclusive. Still, it is impressive enough to have persuaded a number of individuals and organizations to issue warnings against cigarette smoking.

The list of such actions in the decade or so since the lung cancer scare began is very long, and it keeps growing. Just a few days ago the American Heart Association decided to campaign against cigarettes, with special emphasis on teen-agers. A couple of months ago a new medical publication sponsored jointly by the American Public Health Association, American Heart Association, American Cancer Association, and the National Tuberculosis Association issued figures indicating higher mortality rates among cigarette smokers than among others. In one small but not insignificant case, a hospital in Fitchburg, Mass., acting on the recommendation of its medical staff, banned the sale of cigarettes in the hospital and the nurses' home.

Discordant Cousins

All this time the tobacco industry has taken an understandably defensive position. It set up, several years ago, the Tobacco Industry Research Committee to try to arrive at the truth, if any, behind all the charges and suspicions. Thus far it has been able to say little more than that the charges have not been proved (which is true) and occasionally quote a scientist or medical man who says that other factors than cigarette smoking may be involved in the various diseases now frequently linked to smoking.

But even though on the defensive, the tobacco industry has not retreated —that is, not until the other day when it began what can only be interpreted as strategic withdrawal on one segment of the front. Most of the major cigarette manufacturers decided to stop advertising and promotion on college campuses.

Nothing was said, naturally, to hint that this was any concession by the industry that its products might in fact be harmful. Rather, a spokesman said, "The industry's position has always been that smoking is an adult custom." Nevertheless, this withdrawal from college campuses, where the various cigarette brands fought some of their most vigorous wars for many years, is bound to cause the public to wonder.

Of course, the public has been wondering for some time. Its reluctant suspicions have resulted in a revolution in the cigarette industry, the rise of the filter tips, which may or may not diminish those elements in cigarettes that may or may not be harmful. (And if that sentence is confusing, it is at least in part because the situation itself is confusing.)

Moreover, the public has not allowed its suspicions to interfere substantially with its smoking. There has been some reduction in the annual rate of increase in consumption, but not much.

What is needed is obvious: a definite and authoritative statement on the truth or falsity of the charges against cigarette smoking. Perhaps that need cannot be met now. Maybe nobody knows enough to be able to make such a statement. Our best hope lies in a study the U. S. Public Health Service undertook about a year ago, but no report has been issued. When it is, maybe it will resolve these doubts one way or another.

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Source: https://www.industrydocuments.ucsf.edu/docs/nkyk0000